



# Liver Biopsy

## **What is a liver biopsy?**

A liver biopsy is a medical procedure. The doctor who performs the biopsy will remove a very small piece, or sample, of your liver. This piece is not large enough to harm you permanently in any way.

Your liver sample will be taken to a laboratory, where it can be studied. You shouldn't have to stay in the hospital longer than four to six hours after the biopsy.

A liver biopsy is not usually painful and healing can be quick. However, you will still need to avoid certain kinds of physical activity for one to two weeks afterward, so that your body can heal.

## **How will a liver biopsy help me?**

A liver biopsy will help you and your doctor find out more about the health of your liver. This is important if you have hepatitis C, or another liver disease, and you are trying to decide about treatment. A liver biopsy can also be helpful if your doctor is not sure what is causing your liver problem.

## **How is a liver biopsy done?**

A liver biopsy is done in a hospital. You will probably lie flat on your back during the whole procedure.

First, the doctor will "prep" you by finding the exact location of the liver inside your body. Then, the doctor will clean the skin above this location and inject a local anesthetic (pain-killer) into the area.

After the anesthetic has taken effect, the doctor will use a needle to take out a small piece of your liver. This part of the procedure is done quickly.

## **Is a liver biopsy painful?**

Most people who have a liver biopsy say that it doesn't hurt. You may feel a sting when the doctor injects the anesthetic. You might also have a feeling of pressure when the doctor inserts the biopsy needle into your side. Some people say that they feel this pressure in their right shoulder, as well.

## **What happens after the liver biopsy is done?**

After the biopsy is done, your doctor might ask you to roll over onto your side and lie still for one or two hours. This is to make sure that you do not have bleeding or other problems caused by getting up too soon. After a while, your doctor might order blood tests, just to make sure that there are no other complications.

Before long, you will probably be told that you can go home. Follow your doctor's advice not to lift heavy weights or exercise too hard for about two weeks, so that your body has enough time to heal.

### **When shouldn't I have a liver biopsy?**

You shouldn't have a liver biopsy if you have used aspirin or another blood-thinning medicine the week before your procedure. You should not take these medicines in the week after your biopsy either. Make sure that you tell your doctor about all the medications you have been taking or that you plan to take.

You also shouldn't have a liver biopsy if your doctor thinks that your liver disease has progressed to the point that your blood doesn't clot normally.

### **What are the risks of a liver biopsy?**

A liver biopsy is generally considered very safe. But, as is true for any medical procedure, there are also some risks. These risks include

- bleeding from the liver
- penetration of other organs, if something goes wrong when the needle is inserted
- very rarely, death (1 in 10,000 cases)

### **Does everyone with liver disease need a biopsy?**

No, not everyone. But if you have a serious or long-term liver problem like hepatitis C, a biopsy is the best way to get complete information about the health of your liver. In some cases, your doctor might need to do a biopsy to find out what's wrong or to recommend the best treatment.

### **How many liver biopsies will I need?**

Many people need a liver biopsy only once. Some people need them several times. If your doctor thinks that your liver is changing, you might have to have more than one liver biopsy. You might also need to have more than one liver biopsy if you take medicine for hepatitis C or if you have a liver transplant.

### **Who can I call for more information?**

- **Your local VA medical center**  
and visit <http://www.va.gov/hepatitisc>
- **The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC)**  
(888) 4HEPCDC [(888) 443-7232] and visit <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>

The Centers of Excellence in Hepatitis C Research and Education collaborated with American Liver Foundation in the development of this document